

Deanna Gutierrez, NM – 2015

When asked to share my experience as a delegate of the 53rd United States Senate Youth Program, I find myself overwhelmed. Attempting to reflect upon my experience really puts the intensity of the program into perspective. I recall finding it amusing that the alumni assured us that Washington Week was easily going to be the best week of our lives. I did not realize how impactful and eye-opening my experience would be. Our week began with a VIP tour of Mt. Vernon and the Newseum, the only typical tourist activities we would be doing during the entire week. The next day our more intense schedule began, starting with Chief Judge Robert Henry, former judge in the 10th District. As one of the first speakers, I was shocked at his blunt distaste for the other branches of government. He claimed that, "We currently only have one out of three branches of the government actually working, increasing the heavy lifting of the judiciary." This caused me to wonder if the week was going to be composed of the finger-pointing and partisan that appears to be characteristic of the current political climate.

In addition to Judge Henry, throughout the course of a week we spoke with the Secretary of the Senate Julie Adams, the Parliamentarian of the Senate Elizabeth MacDonough, the senate historian, assistant attorney general for the Civil Right Division, the NASA administrator, the president of the World Bank, the secretary of Homeland Security, the deputy secretary of Defense, the Swedish ambassador, the CEO and founder of CSPAN, the chief White House correspondent from CBS, Senator Collins, Senator Gardner, Senator Manchin, Senator Isakson, Supreme Court Justice Breyer, and President Barack Obama. All of the speakers had interesting perspectives on the path to success and the role of the American government. Before the trip, I had not realized that it is possible to make such an impact in the government without being an elected official.

Although the entire week was phenomenal, meeting the president of the United States was understandably one of the most notable parts of the week. At breakfast Thursday morning you could sense the excitement among all of the delegates. After spending approximately an hour and a half in security, we finally entered the East Wing of the residence. Reality finally hit when we were passing windows overlooking the lawn, and we could see the swarms of tourists, snapping pictures on the other side of the fence. Waiting in the East Room, we eagerly waited for President Obama's appearance. Once he entered from the double doors directly across from us, the air was sucked out of the room. He sauntered in, stopping only a few feet away from me, and addressed us with a casual, "How you guys doing?" Regardless of political ideology, it was a tremendous honor to meet the president of the United States. President Obama took the time to answer a few questions regarding the future of our country, some of the current issues we are facing today, along with offering some personal advice. He urged us to focus on what we wanted to accomplish, rather than the titles and positions we wanted to hold.

On a more reflective note, one of the reoccurring pieces of advice that many of the speakers shared with us was that in order to make difference we must strive for change, rather than waiting to be in a position of power to make the changes. As a generally high-achieving student, I found it frustrating that many of the high level officials such as the parliamentarian of the Senate, the secretary of Homeland Security, the president of the World Bank, and a Supreme Court justice attributed much of their success to simply being in the right place at the right time. Although I learned a lot in terms of how our government works and had the opportunity to engage in intellectual conversations with some truly amazing individuals, one of the biggest things I took away from the program was that knowledge is power. Justice Breyer explained that there is no guarantee for success, and that, "If you do your work very well, you can do homework for the rest of your life." I realized that I must shift my focus to learning as much as I can, enjoy the learning process, and also take President Obama's advice into account. Not many high school students, much less adults, can say they have had dinner with the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, been into the chambers of the Supreme Court, or met the president in the White House. The United States Senate Youth Program is truly an extraordinary experience that I was extremely fortunate to share with 103 of the most driven, inspiring teens that I have met. I am certain that this experience will have a lasting impact on my view of public service and influence my future goals and aspirations.